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SUBJECT: DPM ESSAWI: GOI LEADERSHIP ON DISPLACEMENT NEEDED

Classified By: Charge dQAffaires a.i. Patricia A. Butenis for reasons 1

11. (C) Summary: Deputy Prime Minister Essawi told Political-Minister Counselor, Senior Coordinator for Refugees and IDPs, OFDA Representative and Refcoord on April 16 that effective GOI leadership was needed to address IraqQs displacement crisis, that he would do more within his domain of services, but faced constraints in taking on a broader GOI leadership role himself. Essawi spoke frankly of the political and economic conditions hampering the GOIQs and his own efforts: weak Iraqi economy, budget constraints, limited job opportunities, the Minister of Displacement and MigrationQs general unwillingness to share information and cooperate with other line ministries, Shia desire to delay Sunni returns as a way of solidifying their political dominance, and the Prime MinisterQs own desire to consolidate power before upcoming elections. Essawi commented on the PMQs sensitivity to media coverage and suggested using the media to motivate the GOI into action. End summary

12. (C) Political Minister Counselor (PMIN), Senior IDP and Refugee Coordinator, OFDA Senior Humanitarian Advisor and Refcoord called on Deputy Prime Minister Essawi at his residence to discuss Iraqi displacement. The Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) was joined by Senior Advisor Jaber al Jaber. PMIN and Senior Coordinator emphasized the importance the US places on facilitating voluntary and sustainable returns, citing the PresidentQs Camp Lejuene speech and recent discussion with Prime Minister Maliki. PMIN re-iterated the PresidentQs commitment to help Iraq address displacement. PMIN urged the GOI to revitalize its own efforts through greater coordination and organization initiated from the highest levels of government. Essawi thanked PMIN for US support in this crucial matter and conveyed his own personal commitment in addressing displacement issues.

13. (C) Senior Coordinator explained that the USG is currently looking at ways to better direct international assistance where it is most needed to create an environment conducive for voluntary returns. He noted IOM figures showing 300,000 returns in 2008 and UN expectations for larger numbers in 2009. Senior Coordinator credited MODM with disbursing stipends to IDPs and some progress on payments to returnees, but noted that the Ministry did not have the capacity or mandate to substantially facilitate returns. Needs assessments conducted by UNHCR, IOM and NGOs all list security, employment, housing and the availability of essential services as the most important considerations for IDPs and refugees in deciding whether to return, none of which MODM has control over. In contrast, the DPM, with his authority over essential services does have authority to coordinate GOI efforts in some important areas. Senior Coordinator commented that there was a need for greater GOI effort, coordination and credibility in addressing the needs of the displaced and supporting returns, and asked whether Essawi could play a bigger role.

14. (C) Essawi characterized MODM Minister Sultan as

protective of his role as GOI lead on IDPs and refugees, saying he had rebuffed earlier suggestions from the DPM and from other ministers for greater cooperation. Essawi declared that this was no longer acceptable and said he would ask Sultan to meet him next week to discuss approaches and programs. He instructed his staff to obtain MODMQs displacement and return data, which showed where displacement and returns were concentrated and would be of use in targeting services. Essawi acknowledged that jobs were a critical factor for returnees, but said that the tight GOI budget had led to a GOI-wide hiring ban. Job creation would have to come from the private sector, the prospects for which were not promising in the near term.

15. (C) Asked by Senior Coordinator about IDP/refugee participation in national elections, Essawi replied that improving participation of IDPs and creating a mechanism for absentee voting for refugees were essential. But he noted that some in the government wanted to keep the sectarian map as it is and had little interest in returns or political participation by the displaced. He added that IraqQs political map had become fluid and commented that the gains MalikiQs party had made in provincial elections may ultimately prove to be a mixed blessing for the PM. Essawi observed that inexperience of the new governors and provincial councils, very limited resources, a poor economy and fragile security situation may set the stage for a voter backlash in national elections. Essawi made little secret of his desire to see such an outcome.

16. (C) With regard to his playing a prominent, public role, in leading GOI efforts to facilitate returns, Essawi

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commented that the PM was wary of anyone attempting to assert greater authority. With national elections weighing heavily on MalikiQs mind, Essawi said he would have to tread softly or expect the PM to begin undermining him. In response to PMINQs question how to best influence the Prime Minister, Essawi suggested that continued US pressure on the PM to act and criticism in the media could be effective. Essawi added that the PM takes notice of issues raised by the US, as IDPs and refugees were by the President during his recent visit. But he stated Maliki was most sensitive to media coverage. According to Essawi, sustained, critical press coverage would be the best lever to focus the entire Cabinet on returns. Asked about the PMQs statements that there were only 230,000 refugees, Essawi expressed frustration that the Prime Minister had consistently sought to downplay the number and commented that good data would make this easier to correct. He thought that while the number may not be 2 million, it was far greater than 200,000. He said that a possible trip by the PM to Syria offered an opportunity to set a more positive tone, which he would work to achieve. Essawi ended by saying that there are some things he could do to direct line ministries to improve services in specific neighborhoods that could facilitate returns. He said he would consider how he might broach the issue of broader GOI leadership with the PM. Essawi recommended further discussions after his meeting with MODM Minister Sultan.

17. (C) Comment: Essawi is a frank interlocutor and deeply committed to addressing displacement. While he is particularly attentive to the needs and grievances of the Sunni community he represents, his leadership of line ministries to improve services is widely regarded as non-sectarian and non-partisan. We expect that he will press Sultan to improve performance and coordination. More importantly, we expect that Essawi will make an effort to focus the line ministries on improving services in return areas. He will be an important partner to us as we seek to support these efforts. However, EssawiQs ability to lead overall GOI efforts to address displacement depends on the Prime Minister. We assess that IraqQs political fault

lines, jockeying in advance of national elections in January and the PMQs ambivalence about returns, make him a long shot for this role. We will continue our dialogue with him on services and on improving GOI leadership after he meets with MODM Minister Sultan. EssawiQs plans to lead a ministerial delegation to Washington in late May offers an opportunity to engage him further on returnee issues. End comment.

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